



United States Marine Corps  
Professional Reading Program  
**On Combat Discussion Guide**



**Background:** This book greatly expands upon Grossman's earlier work, *On Killing* (also on the Marine PME Reading List for Master Sergeants). His work on "killology" has been considered pioneering by many in and outside the military/law enforcement community. While *On Combat* follows *On Killing* and expands upon it, this work does not replace it. There are concepts that are shared in both, but each is sufficiently different to warrant reading of both books.

**1. What are the authors' mission (task and purpose) and central thesis in writing this book?**

*Grossman's purpose is to "seek hidden facts and intimate things, so that we can send warriors into battle who are forewarned and forearmed." (pp. xi-xii). The discussion group should spend a few minutes discussing the thesis, which is not laid out explicitly. A central thread running through the book is how it is only recently (within the 20<sup>th</sup> century) that any effort has been made to understand the nature of battle and its effects on the participants. Implicit in Grossman's discussion and analysis is that combat training must reflect an accurate understanding of human nature under the intense duress such as battle offers—all too often it does not.*

**2. What part of the book was the most effective in accomplishing the authors' mission? What part of the book was the least effective?**

*The discussion facilitator should expect that the group will have great difficulty reaching consensus on this issue, as much of what resonates to some given their experience will not seem to be so significant to others, particularly for those with combat experience under fire—what rings true to them will seem most important and most effective in the book, while that which does not fall within their experience will not. For those without any experience, much if not all of the book will seem relatively new, interesting, and intriguing, if not downright controversial given the historical stereotypes of war and battle.*

*Most controversial for the group will possibly be the authors' discussions on violent videogames (pp. 77-87). Perhaps even less relevant for military members not involved in law enforcement will be the chapter on "The Evolution of Combat and Domestic Violent Crime" (pp 220-255)—there does not seem to be much relevance to the problems faced by Marines in combat.*

**3. What do the authors assume to be true in order to accomplish the mission? Do the authors validate these assumptions in the book?**

*Expect the lion's share of the discussion to revolve around this question, particularly given a discussion group with combat veterans. Most (but fortunately not all) of the arguments are made using anecdotal evidence to illustrate key points. That is both the strength and the weakness of the work. Those who have been in close quarters fighting will relate to many of the stories; those who have not may wish for more quantitative/statistical/clinical background such*





*as is done for heart rate versus performance parameters (p. 31) and perception distortion (pp. 55, 111-112)*

**4. The part of the book that is most relevant to what I / we do is:**

*Much will depend on the billets/specialties of those in the discussion groups. It is natural that those who will be most likely to conduct close combat will focus on the first three sections. Those who are immediately supervising will likewise focus on this, but will wish for more detail on how to train in ways that take such effects into account. Higher-level commanders and those concerned with health and family issues will likely be more intrigued by Section Four "The Price Of Combat: After the Smoke Clears."*

**5. Identify the authors' specific and implied conclusions.**

*Section One: The Physiology of Combat: The Anatomy of the Human Body in Battle.*

*Specified Conclusions. The body physically undergoes changes during the uniquely high stress of mortal danger that combat presents. These are generally not well understood by the layman and even military/law enforcement professionals.*

*Implied Conclusions. We don't train our soldiers, Marines, and policemen to anticipate these changes, to recognize them when they happen, and to plan and prepare for them in their training routines and in the conduct of battle or a close encounter that can easily turn lethally violent.*

*Section Two: Perceptual Distortions in Combat—An Altered State of Consciousness*

*Specified Conclusions. The mind's sensing and thinking processes are altered during the uniquely high stress of mortal danger that combat presents.*

*Implied Conclusions. We don't train our soldiers and Marines to anticipate these effects either. We are victims of our own myth-making regarding how people should think and behave in battle. This is an injustice to those who serve and we must remedy such ignorance and better prepare those who are put into combat situations.*

*Section Three: The Call to Combat—Where Do We Get Such Men?*

*Specified Conclusions. There are specific attitudes and techniques that must be mastered to succeed in combat situations. Proportionately few show mastery of these given our historical experience.*

*Implied Conclusions. We may be able to increase the proportion of "natural fighters" if we apply ourselves to inculcating the described attitudes and applying the training techniques outlined in this section.*





#### Section Four: The Price of Combat—After the Smoke Clears

**Specified Conclusions.** *Post-event reactions are both short and long-term; these must be understood and dealt with by the warrior, the warrior's loved ones and friends, and leadership/caregivers.*

**Implied Conclusions.** *Psychiatric casualties can be minimized through pre-event and post-event training, education, and application of some basic principles/techniques.*

#### Conclusion.

**Specified Conclusions.** *The warrior's role is not to kill, but to protect, preserve, defend, and serve society. Killing is often necessary to accomplishing those tasks.*

**Implied Conclusions.** *Moral courage is needed to succeed, and knowledge is a necessary component to achieve the moral courage required by a warrior.*

**6a. With respect to the authors' conclusions (either specified or implied), I / we accept or agree with the following:** *While there may be minor disagreement on the specifics, the discussion facilitator can expect general agreement on the specified and implied conclusions above, given a high proportion of combat veterans who can add their own illustrations. Among Marines who have no combat experience, it may be difficult to form consensus agreement, particularly where cherished myths are at stake/endangered. Macho and jingoistic bravado may well evidence themselves; it will be important for the facilitator to get the group beyond this in a way that does not alienate those who are thumping their chests.*

**6b. With respect to the authors' conclusions (either specified or implied), I / we reject or do not agree with the following:** *Expect some discussion to tangent into the videogames and domestic violent crime—the discussion facilitator will want to steer the group back to considerations that affect Marines in battle and/or stability operations.*

**7a. This book made a favorable impression on me and it will change the way I approach:** *The transition question should naturally lead to this issue. The below are some topics the discussion group should come up with—there may be others.*

Reading military history for usable lessons. *As we see in Keegan's book, The Face of Battle, there is only now coming to light military history that is dealing with aspects of violence, battle, and human nature such as what Grossman and Christensen describe.*

Writing after action reports/lessons learned. *There is a natural tendency not to talk about embarrassing elements of human nature in combat, but these need to be related so that the rest*





*of us can learn. Because of the “mythology” of what Marines should and should not do in such stressful situations, things that fall outside that “paradigm” are often left un-recounted and/or neglected. This must stop.*

*Teaching Marines what battle is really like. Discussion group members will point out all kinds of aspects of battle and danger that Marines must know, but all will agree that the authors’ mantra of continuing to fight even when wounded is essential to inculcate (pp 134-153) and that one must always be MENTALLY as well as physically ready to kill (pp. 154-171).*

*Teaching Leaders how to lead in battle. Combat leadership is not covered in much detail in this book, but it is not difficult to develop ideas from what is provided. Most of these ideas will concern how to train better and how to set the proper example.*

*Rethinking procedures, techniques, and training. Put more emphasis on developing procedures and techniques that can work in degraded mental and moral states, and develop reflexive actions where appropriate to mitigate some of the problems. One example is “tactical breathing” (pp. 43 and 49) to get heart rate down below “Condition Red” (or higher) conditions when doing functions requiring fine motor skills (sniping, punching numbers/letters into a keypad, talking into a radio, etc.). Another is making head calls immediately before going out on patrol/crossing the LD to minimize natural but involuntary body functions where imminent combat is foreseen (pp. 8-11). Constant rehearsal of critical fine motor skills necessary in Condition Red (or higher) situations is essential (pp. 46-48). Training practices of designating people/units as “dead” after they make mistakes is highly discouraged (p. 129). Combat stress inoculation (e.g., paintball) is important to develop autopilot skills needed to survive and win in combat.*

*Understanding battlefield effects/results on human beings. The discussion group should focus on Sections One and Two and think about how these physiological and psychological effects demand changes in our tactics, techniques, procedures, and styles of leadership. One good illustration—also mentioned by S.L.A. Marshall—is how troops are exhausted and will fall asleep in the middle of the day after attacking, despite the high risk of enemy counterattack, due to parasympathetic backlash (p. 16). Another is why leading from the front is so important—auditory exclusion effects mean you have to get visual attention from your subordinates before they can hear you in a fight (p. 60). Equally important is how to handle the post-event effects, particularly those that linger long after the battle is done (pp. 260-331).*

**7b. This book made an unfavorable impression for the following reasons:** *While the authors’ style in engaging and even engrossing, there will be those discussion group participants who will want more “hard” or scientific information to be convinced, rather than the mostly anecdotal evidence that is provided. Such skeptics are best steered towards the recommended additional reading.*

**8. Recommended Additional Reading:** *For those discussion group participants who wish to expand their grasp of how people behave in battle, the following works may be useful.*





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David Grossman. *On Killing*. PME Reading List book.

S.L.A. Marshall. *Soldier's Load and The Mobility of a Nation*. PME Reading List book.

Jonathan Shay. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. PME Reading List book.

Jonathan Shay. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*.

Lord Moran. *The Anatomy of Courage*. PME Reading List book.

Richard Holmes. *Acts of War: Behavior of Men in Battle*

Bruce Siddle. *Sharpening the Warrior's Edge: The Psychology & Science of Training*

Charles Remsberg. *The Tactical Edge: Surviving High Risk Patrol*

Ben Shalit. *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat*.

Richard Gabriel. *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War*.

Alexis Artwohl and Loren Christenson. *Deadly Force Encounters*

David A. Klinger. *Into the Kill Zone: A Cop's Eye View of Deadly Force*

Gavin de Becker. *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us*

Submitted by: E.M.Walters

